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On Saints, Sinners, and Sex in the Apocalypse of St. John and the Sefer Zerubbabel

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Abstract

The Apocalypse of St. John and the Sefer Zerubbabel [a.k.a Apocalypse of Zerubbabel] are among the most popular apocalypses of the Common Era. While the Johannine Apocalypse was written by a first-century Jewish-Christian author and would later be refracted through a decidedly Christian lens, and the Sefer Zerubbabel was probably composed by a seventh-century Jewish author for a predominantly Jewish audience, the two share much in the way of plot, narrative motifs, and archetypal characters. An examination of these commonalities and, in particular, how they intersect with gender and sexuality, suggests that these texts also may have functioned similarly as a call to reform within the generations that originally received them and, perhaps, among later medieval generations in which the texts remained important.

The Apocalypse of St. John and the Sefer Zerubbabel, or Book of Zerubbabel, are among the most popular apocalypses of the Common Era.¹ While the Johannine Apocalypse was written by a first-century Jewish-Christian author and would later be refracted through a decidedly Christian lens, and the Sefer Zerubbabel was probably composed by a seventh-century Jewish author for a predominantly Jewish audience, the two share much in the way of plot, narrative motifs, and archetypal characters. An examination of these commonalities and, in particular, how they intersect with gender and sexuality, suggests that these texts also may have functioned similarly as a call to reform within the generations that originally received them and, perhaps, among later medieval generations in which the texts remained important.

In general, the apocalyptic plot centers on the revelation of purportedly secret knowledge of the end of the present era and the beginning of a new and final era. Typically, this information is conveyed through an angel to a biblical persona of famed repute who then communicates the message to readers and hearers of their apocalypse.² Apocalypses commonly begin with the reader's introduction to the receiver of revelation deep in thought or prayer, piously seeking

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divine guidance and consolation because of the trials and tribulations the faithful suffer at the hands of an especially iniquitous individual or group of outsiders—forces of evil—who mock and tempt those who attempt to remain devoted to God. Usually this iniquitous group is composed of both Gentiles and wicked Jews who consort with them in Jewish apocalypses and some combination of Jews, Pagans, Muslims, and sinful Christians in Christian apocalypses.³ In either variant, the followers of God are exhorted to remain faithful and encouraged through the appearance, or newly discovered prophecy, of a long awaited messianic figure who was typically descended from the biblical King David's royal lineage and shared with him the role of unifier of Israel. When the Messiah arrives, he rallies the troops and wages war against the forces of evil. Of course, the good are ultimately victorious and their ascension marks the end of an era of persecution in which society had been governed by the ungodly and the beginning of a new theocracy, ruled by the Messiah made manifest and populated by the pious.

As familiar as the contours of apocalyptic narratives are, their purpose is not so easily accounted for. Indeed, what the function may be and whether or not apocalypses have an explicit one or not has been debated for some time.⁴ One of the more salient explanations of the last century is that apocalypses served as expressions of hope for a downtrodden populace. As members of a much maligned minority culture, the oppressed could only fantasize about a time when their sovereignty and religious freedom would be restored and their society flourish while the persecuting majority would receive their justly deserved comeuppance.⁵ In this regard, apocalyptic literature has been viewed as a literature of protest.⁶

There is something very appealing about this reading, all the more in the current climate of disillusionment with the governing elite, protest culture, and stifled attempts at revolution. Even more than appealing, it is entirely plausible that an author who believed his or her community was righteous and persecuted without cause may have sought comfort in the idea that God, working through a chosen Messiah, would avenge and handsomely reward those who had

been faithful. There is just one problem. Authors of antique and medieval apocalyptic literature did not necessarily represent their communities as exceptionally devout. To the contrary, apocalypticists were fairly forthright in stating that all or part of their communities had fallen short of religious expectations and obligations. At other times, they employed symbolism—particularly feminine personifications of sinfulness and/or allusions to unseemly sexual relations—to convey the shortcomings of their communities and to call for reform or, if not having yet sinned and succumbed to temptation, to call for resistance.⁷ Both methods of reproach are evident in the Apocalypse of St. John and the Sefer Zerubbabel.

The Apocalypse of St. John

Antique tradition that would carry over to the Middle Ages maintained that John the Evangelist, beloved disciple of Jesus, wrote the Apocalypse on the Island of Patmos in the late-first century of the Common Era, in the aftermath of the First Jewish War (66-73 C.E.). The majority of biblicists have accepted this dating while acknowledging that the author was not the apostle John but an otherwise unknown John. In canonical form, the Apocalypse is 22 chapters in length and is composed of a series of distinct segments.⁸ In the opening verses (Apoc. 1:1-2), the author introduced the text as a prophecy and in so doing connoted a continuation of the Nevi'im of the Tanakh [prophets of the Hebrew Bible], in which the prophets urged reform so that their communities might reaffirm and reconstitute their unique relationship with God and be blessed, as in Deutero-Isaiah, with a Messiah sent by God. However, unlike the earlier Hebrew prophets, John openly proclaimed the Apocalypse to be a revelation of Jesus, given by God, and delivered by an angel as a means of showing the faithful among the nations, but especially Israel, the events that would transpire leading up to the Eschaton [Gk. the final event in the divine plan; the end of the world.] Throughout the course of the text, the reader learns that all foretold will take place in stages— first, in preparation for the Jesus's, or Messiah's, coming; second, once the Messiah, having returned, battles with the forces of evil; and third, after the Messiah and the

forces of good are victorious and living in peace and prosperity while those who had sided with the forces of evil meet their fate in eternal damnation.

Immediately following the introductory verses, John, instructed by an angel, addressed the behavior of specific servants of God, the seven churches of Asia Minor, before receiving further visions and prophesying about global events. Two main themes emerge in John's letters to the churches: exhortation to continue in good works and pious behavior in anticipation of the Messiah's return; and rebuke for tendencies deemed unseemly, such as a decline in ardor for God, as well as the far more egregious tendencies, such as engaging in idolatry.⁹ To the churches at both Smyrna and Philadelphia, the message was highly positive. John praised their works and encouraged them to remain faithful, even though they would be persecuted and slandered by false Jews who worshipped at the "synagogue of Satan." (Apoc. 2:9; 3:9) To all others—the other five out of seven churches—John included rebuke. The churches at Ephesus, Sardis, and Laodicea were complimented for their good works and efforts to maintain the integrity of the community, when applicable, but John also chastised them for their diminished ardor for God in a tiered model of decreasing devotion. For instance, to the church at Ephesus, John wrote:

I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. (Apoc. 2:4-5)

To Sardis:

Remember then what you received and heard; obey it and repent . . . you have still a few persons in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. (Apoc. 3:3-5)

And to Laodicea:

I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot . . . Therefore I counsel you to buy from me . . . white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. (Apoc. 3:15-18)

Within these reproofs, John included cultural references that would have been readily grasped by his contemporaries—Laodicea, for instance, was known for both its waters that were

“neither cold nor hot” but tepid, and for its manufacturing of salve for the eyes.¹⁰ Yet, in these initial letters and throughout his Apocalypse, John also included allusions to reform literature found throughout the Hebrew Bible. In Jewish Scripture, the need for reform is commonly represented through the gendered allegory of a woman unfaithful to her husband, symbolic of Israel unfaithful to God. And calls for Israel to return to the ardor of youth—meaning: to fulfill the commandments with zeal, as new lovers at the beginning of a relationship—are peppered throughout the prophetic literature.¹¹ Such exhortations were addressed to communities that had become complacent; while they performed their religious obligations, they did so in an inadequate and perfunctory manner—that is to say, in a manner that was neither completely “cold” nor sufficiently “hot.”

“Uncleanliness” and “nakedness” are similarly found throughout the Hebrew Bible as indicative of a community or an individual in need of reform. Rather than the more passive complacency, these terms often refer to active sinfulness—especially idolatry, which is depicted alternately as unfaithfulness, adultery, fornication, promiscuity, prostitution, and whoring.¹² The author of Lamentations applied the terms “unclean” and “nakedness” to a personified and feminized Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, despoiled at the time of the Babylonian Exile (598/7 B.C.E.) due to a failure of the city’s inhabitants to show apt devotion to God and, instead, for showing some inclination towards idolatry and idolaters:

Jerusalem sinned grievously, so she has become as one unclean; all who honored her despise her, for they have seen her nakedness; she herself groans, and turns her face away. Her filthiness was in her skirts. (Lam. 1:8-9)

John’s rebuke of the final two churches is along the same lines as that levied at Ephesus, Sardis, and Laodicea, but is much more explicit in its use of the reforming rhetoric of sexual depravity. To the church at Pergamum, after praising the congregation for holding steadfast to the name of Jesus, John aired what was ostensibly Jesus’s complaint:

I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practice fornication . . . Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and make war against them. (Apoc. 2:14,16)

And, to the church at Thyatira, again, as Jesus, John wrote:

I have this against you: you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols. I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her fornication. Beware, I am throwing her on a bed, and those who commit adultery with her I am throwing into great distress, unless they repent of her doings; and I will strike her children dead. (Apoc. 2:20-23)

There is much that could be unpacked in the letters addressed to the churches of Pergamum and Thyatira, but three points are especially significant. First, Balaam and Queen Jezebel are personae from the Hebrew Bible who, if actual people, lived centuries before John wrote his Apocalypse.¹³ According to Hebrew Scripture, these two enticed the ancient Israelites to engage in sexual relations with Gentiles and to commit idolatry.¹⁴ In the biblical narrative, inter-confessional sexual unions typically led to idolatry and incited God's wrath against those who had transgressed.¹⁵ Divine retribution was quick to follow in the form of plague, drought, famine, and the justified slaughter of all Israelite idolaters and those who had "fornicated" with Gentiles.¹⁶ By associating these churches with ancient Israelites who had entertained Balaam and Jezebel, and even presenting the punishment for the two Jezebels's similarly, John associated Pergamum and Thyatira negatively with those who had been tempted by, and had succumbed to, the allure of idolatry time and again.¹⁷ That is to say: John may or may not have known of an actual woman named Jezebel running amok at the time he was writing his Apocalypse, but the archetype was useful.

Second, the specific types of sinfulness that the Balaam and Jezebel of the Hebrew Bible are implicated in—illicit consumption, coitus, and idolatry—were also of significance to emergent rabbinic Jews during the first centuries of the Common Era. This group attempted to

distinguish themselves from multiple other Jewish sects who engaged in actions they deemed idolatrous, not least of all the eating of food that had been offered to foreign deities. Rabbinic prohibitions in the Mishnah give an indication of why food and sex are often associated in biblical censure against idolatry. The basic idea is that impure food was consumed with wine. Consumption of alcohol led to intoxication, which contributed to unchaste sexual unions between faithful Jews and either heretics or Gentiles. And unchaste couplings contributed to idolatry among those who were influenced by lovers to adopt foreign religious practices.¹⁸

Of note, while John's resistance to certain foods is compatible with Jewish biblical and apocryphal texts,¹⁹ as well as Mishnaic prohibitions,²⁰ it is somewhat at odds with the teachings of the Apostle Paul, who famously attempted to distance Christians from the "Old Law" of Jews by proclaiming the freedom from regulation for those who believed in the salvific grace of God through Jesus.²¹ For Paul, all foods, even those offered to idols, were permitted to the hungry servants of Jesus.²² Thus, through this display of aversion to Balaam and Jezebel's food, John's designation of a true believer of Jesus may have shared more cultural similarities with, and an affinity to, rabbinic Jews than with Pauline Jewish-Christians. In all likelihood, it was just such Jewish-Christians to whom John referred when describing the group who worshipped at the "synagogue of Satan." (Apoc. 2:6; 3:9)²³

Third, the latter-day Jezebel's punishment for enticing Israel to turn away from God essentially amounts to setting a scene for gang rape,²⁴ followed presumably by pregnancy, and then the slaughter of children conceived in such a violent manner. In this punitive state, Jezebel is made fully accessible to those whose bodies and souls had been successfully seduced and conquered. Jezebel is eventually destroyed by erstwhile followers to an even greater degree than the peddler of false religion's corrupting influence had bested them. Evidently, it was only through these extreme means that Jesus would be able to distinguish the faithful who merited reward from the sinners. Those who were able to overcome their base and volatile desires and

had resisted penetrating Jezebel with their fleshy phallus would be rewarded with ruling over the nations with an even stronger, longer lasting, “iron rod.” (Apoc. 2:27)

The feminized allegory of whoredom to represent the allure of idolatry and the constant struggle to overcome this desire is also evident throughout the remainder of John’s Apocalypse, in which the author expanded the intended audience by relaying visions of interest to “many peoples and nations and languages and kings.” (Apoc. 10:11) It is in these visions that John’s readers are introduced to the persona whose infamy ranks in league with that of Antichrist—Babylon the Great. Also sometimes known as the Great Whore, like Queen Jezebel in the Hebrew Bible and the latter-day Jezebel of Thyatira, Babylon was known for the quality of her seduction and the quantity of her conquests. Moving beyond the confines of Israel or the seven churches to which John wrote, Babylon was able to arouse the lust of the whole earth and took as her paramours kings, wealthy merchants, and the powerful, each of whom she led into idolatrous worship and fornication.²⁵ She was imagined by John, and often depicted in later iconography, both as a woman riding on another figure of false religion and enemy to God—the Seven-Headed Beast (Apoc. 17:3)—that John identified as representing the kings of the earth, and, as seated on “waters”—identified as “peoples and multitudes and nations and languages.”²⁶ (Apoc. 17:15) In either mount, Babylon is in a position evocative of her sexual dominance that later ecclesiastics would come to fear as unnatural and unlawful for women.²⁷

Presented as fully conscious of her own influence and the power she wields, the personification of Babylon is haughty enough to think to herself: “I rule as a queen; I am no widow and I will never see grief.” (Apoc. 18:7) This quotation echoes the prophet Isaiah’s depiction of Babylon penned several centuries prior. Once called “mistress of kingdoms” (Isa. 47:5) who had sat upon a throne (Isa. 47:1) and a “lover of pleasures,” Isaiah imagined Babylon saying to herself “I am, and there is no one besides me; I shall not sit as a widow or know the loss of children.” (Isa. 47:8) The inclusion of this internal dialogue in Isaiah’s prophecy and

John's Apocalypse provides a marked contrast to how both described what became of Babylon the Great as punishment for leading so many of Israel astray. John prophesied that the Beast and the ten horns on the head of the Beast, the same who had paraded her before the nations of the earth, "will hate the whore; they will make her desolate and naked; they will devour her flesh and burn her up with fire," (Apoc. 17:16) while Isaiah, more subdued, declared that she would be abandoned by those who had once "trafficked" with her (Isa. 47:15). Like Jezebel of Thyatira, John's Babylon is the victim of sexual assault by those she had once successfully seduced.²⁸ And, as with the latter-day Jezebel whose erstwhile partners were called to "repent of *her* doings," (Apoc. 3:22) the female persona here is held far more culpable than her former lovers who still might be redeemed. Indeed, John recorded that a voice from heaven urged those who lagged behind in abbreviating liaisons with Babylon to "come out of her . . . do not take part in *her* sins . . . that you do not share in *her* plagues" (Apoc. 18:4)—as if sex acts were performed by her alone and as if any infection or disease resulting from contact with her lasted only so long as one dallied within.

The depraved images of Jezebel and Babylon have virtuous counterparts in John's Apocalypse. Jezebel, whose children God promises to strike dead, proves a foil to John's presentation of the celestial and saintly Mother of the Messiah, imagined as "a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars," (Apoc. 12:1) whose child is saved and hidden in heaven by God when forces of evil unsuccessfully attempted to eat and thus kill the infant. To this Mother of the Messiah, God grants eagle's wings to fly to the desert so that she may hide safely in a place prepared for her. The other pair of female personae, Babylon and the Bride of the Lamb, also provide a contrast. The Bride becomes part of the new ruling court in the messianic era, she is the queen consort to the animal Messiah—the Lamb—contra Babylon, a self proclaimed queen,²⁹ who served as the Beast's whore.³⁰ These few examples help illustrate John's negative perceptions of women and all

pervasive misogyny, even in the midst of what may sometimes appear to be positive depictions of women. For, while both classes of female personae are defined by their relationship to their child or children and/or husband or pimp, the positive representations of Mother and Bride are unnamed and mute, wholly passive,³¹ demurring, and modest in comparison to the femmes fatales, Jezebel and Babylon, who are depicted as vocally spreading lies, flagrantly spreading their legs, and, along with them, physical and spiritual disease.

Of note, while a typical mother and bride might be assumed to have had or to be on the verge of having sexual relations, John's Apocalypse does not include any positive representations of sexual encounters to contrast with the highly negative ones. Moreover, John's Mother and Bride are cast as asexual and symbolic rather than actual women. A male lover of the Celestial Mother is absent in the text and the Bride's marriage need be an allegorical union with her Lamb husband for it not to verge into a negative connotation of bestiality. John's resistance to positive depictions of sexual activity is further indicated by the assumption that even heteronormative sex—an act generally celebrated in the Jewish tradition—was corrupting.³² This is evident when John presented the pious who would be rewarded in heaven with secret knowledge as men “who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins.” (Apoc.14:4)

The Sefer Zerubbabel

Some centuries later, another Jewish apocalypse began to circulate. Unlike John's Apocalypse, there is not a standardized text of the Sefer Zerubbabel, or even, for that matter, a standardized title.³³ The longest version, contributing to the fullest and best known modern transcription and translation, and the text that is utilized here unless otherwise noted, is found in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Heb. d. 11, ff. 248a-251a.³⁴ In it, readers are introduced to a pseudepigraphical account of the biblical persona Zerubbabel. In the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible, Zerubbabel figures as the last male heir from the lineage of King David who oversaw the

construction of the Second Temple and governed Jerusalem as exilarch.³⁵ According to rabbinic literature, early patristic, Gnostic, and Islamic writings, Zerubbabel was also instrumental in the reinstatement of the Temple cult and the preservation of Hebrew Scripture. Because of these associations, Zerubbabel was sometimes depicted as a messianic figure and, at others, a prefiguration of other messiahs, including Jesus and Muhammad.³⁶

In the fullest version of the Sefer Zerubbabel, the reader is introduced to the title character that was deep in prayer and pondering whether and when there would be another Temple to replace the first that Nebuchadnezzar II had destroyed. In this contemplative state, a voice from heaven called out and responded to Zerubbabel's query, promising to reveal what would transpire in the future. Through the aid of spiritual time travel, Zerubbabel was carried to a city identified intertextually as both Nineveh and Rome.³⁷ Once there, the same heavenly voice directed Zerubbabel to where the long awaited Messiah of Davidic lineage, Menachem ben 'Amiel, was imprisoned. At first sight, the Messiah appeared "despised and wounded, lowly and in pain," much as the messianic suffering servant found in Isaiah 53 and discussed in rabbinic lore.³⁸ Yet, unlike the Suffering Servant who was depicted as something of a sacrificial lamb for the shortcomings of other's, Menachem's location in a *bet ha-toref* suggested his status as sufferer may have been something closer to the Man of Sorrows found in Lamentations 3 who had been punished, however severely, for personal transgressions. For, the term *bet ha-toref* can be translated alternately as "the house of filth," "brothel," or "the vagina," but is also understood as meaning "the house of idolatry" or "church."³⁹ More than a mere insult, the double entendre underscores the trope of sexual impurity as both an induction into, and a metaphor for, idolatry seen in the Hebrew prophetic literature, as well as in John's Apocalypse, and hints at the possibility that even the Messiah may have succumbed to an illicit sexual and spiritual liaison with foreigners that had proven a distraction from fidelity to God.

Once in the Messiah's presence, Zerubbabel began to pose questions about the eschatological sequence of events before being interrupted by an angel, sometimes depicted as Michael and at others as Metatron,⁴⁰ who disclosed the devastation that would transpire before the new and final messianic era would commence. Zerubbabel was informed that the very Temple the biblical Zerubbabel helped erect would fall at the hands of persecutors and plunderers, and that there would be three battles fought between the forces of good and evil before Israel would be fully victorious. The first would be led by Menachem's mother, Hephzibah, who wielded a wonder-working rod given by God and previously belonging to Adam, Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and David.⁴¹ With this rod, Hephzibah would successfully slay two kings who threatened Jerusalem and Israelite religious practices and guard the eastern gate of the city when further attackers came under the leadership of the king of Persia.

The second battle would be fought between Menachem, who all of a sudden appeared to Zerubbabel as a young man who was beautiful to behold and who Hephzibah bequeathed the magic rod to, and Armilos, an Antichrist figure who was the son of Satan and a stone statue carved in the shape of a woman. Michael described the unnamed statue as residing in another *bet ha-toref*. The statue was overwhelmingly beautiful and employed as a tool of Armilos's persecution. Indeed, it was the final straw in inciting the Messiah, Menachem's, vengeance against Armilos. For Michael told Zerubbabel that, immediately before Armilos's death, the Antichrist would

take his mother, the stone from which he was born, out of the *bet ha-toref*. . . [and] From all over, the nations will come to worship that stone, burn incense, and pour libations to her. No one will be able to look upon her face because of her beauty. Whoever does not bow down to her will die, suffering like an animal. (Sefer Zerubbabel)⁴²

The third and final battle, lacking any amount of detail in the extant sources, would be fought by a secondary messianic figure, Nehemiah, and Zerubbabel, presumably against the remaining forces of evil.

The manifold similarities between the Sefer Zerubbabel and John's Apocalypse are most pronounced in regard to the persona of the Mother of the Messiah, who only figures in these two Jewish apocalypses,⁴³ and in the trope of a corrupting woman (or women) who entice idolatry. Yet, even in these examples of affinity, there are some readily identifiable differences in the two apocalypses. For instance, Zerubbabel's Mother of the Messiah, Hephzibah, is named and highly active in the world; God has prepared her for battle; and she has a human husband. As such, actual sexual relations are implied and positively reinforced by the existence of her son.⁴⁴ By contrast, the Mother of the Messiah in John's Apocalypse is unnamed and, after giving birth, recedes to the shadows; God prepares a place for her dormition rather than her glory; and the father of her child is never mentioned, copulation is not even vaguely conjured.⁴⁵ In the case of idolatry inducing women in the Sefer Zerubbabel, it is the disembodied vagina of the *bet ha-toref*, a symbol of the unclean, *niddah* femininity of the Gentile that the early rabbis warned against⁴⁶ contra the embodied archetype of *niddah* past—Jezebel—in John's Apocalypse. And the corrupting stone statue remains passive and unnamed—arguably inanimate, with the exception of its carved reproductive organs—while the personified Babylon the Great is an active agent who mounts conquest after conquest and declares her own significance as a ruler. In each of these instances, similarities are measured through the inversion, and sometimes-splintered allusions to narrative elements and symbolism, rather than in their replication.

As a means of better understanding the symbolism of female persona, scholars of both John's Apocalypse and the Sefer Zerubbabel have often focused on the context of composition. In such studies, Babylon the Great, who is identified intertextually as a city, is generally interpreted as a metaphor for the corrupting trinity of the first century, often deemed the "evil empire"—the

Roman Empire, the imperial cult, and the capital city—which, it has been suggested, John did not want to name out of pragmatic caution for writing within the empire.⁴⁷ The dating of the *Sefer Zerubbabel* is more precarious than that of John's *Apocalypse* and so context is more difficult to determine. The preeminent nineteenth-century scholar, Heinrich Graetz, dated it to the period of the First Crusade because the eschatological numerology seemed to coincide with the latter half of the eleventh century, and because the Roman and Persian persecutors of Jews identified in the *Sefer Zerubbabel* could readily be understood as the Christians and Muslims of the Crusades era.⁴⁸ In the early twentieth century, Israel Lévi countered this position and suggested that both the symbolism and the dating pointed to seventh-century Palestine, in the eastern half of the Roman Empire ruled by Heraclius (r. 610-641).⁴⁹ The majority of scholars have accepted Levi's position, even though the earliest extant fragments of the *Sefer Zeubbabel* date to tenth-century Genizah documents.⁵⁰

With this theory of compositional context in mind, the stone statue of the *Sefer Zerubbabel* has often been interpreted as the fusion between the Eastern Roman Empire (or, the Byzantine Empire) and the burgeoning Mariolatry of the Eastern Orthodox Church, which had been prevalent since at least the fifth century but became increasingly visible under the emperor Heraclius, who reportedly carried an image or statue of the Mary, mother of Jesus, into battle.⁵¹ The benevolent female personae of the nameless woman who was “clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and crowned with twelve stars,” (Apoc. 12:1) and Hephzibah, who wielded the staff of the patriarchs, have also been interpreted as religio-political symbols. Scholarly consensus maintains that the woman crowned with twelve stars represented Mother Israel, adorned with the Twelve Tribes, Mother Mary, and/or Ecclesia (Holy Mother Church) and the Twelve Apostles. In both instances, this maternal personification was probably an appropriation of the ever-popular Mother Goddess in Roman culture that was praised for fertility and believed to be responsible for the morality of children and/or acolytes.⁵² And, in the case of Hephzibah,

there is something of a Jewish response to the growing appeal of Mother Mary, who seemingly filled the need for a feminine deity at a time when the pantheon had contracted into monotheism and religions began to emphasize a masculine, Father God.⁵³

The specific contextual composition of these instances of feminine symbolism, while important to our understanding of early resonances of the Johannine Apocalypse and the Sefer Zerubbabel, mattered little to interpreters of subsequent generations. Instead, they appear to have been more interested in typological understandings which permitted them to read into a bevy of catastrophes signs that the end was nigh.⁵⁴ To this point, there have been several studies that explore the ways in which medieval Christians understood the symbolism found in John's Apocalypse by relating it to their own time period, both in textual and artistic representation. There is little space to discuss their copious findings in the present study or, indeed, to contribute much to them. One point of interest to the present study, however, is found in medieval Christians' increasing recognition of the "woman clothed with the sun" and the Bride of the Lamb as representations of the Mother Mary or Ecclesia, in the same vein as the commonplace conflation between these two feminine personae in Christian exegesis on the Song of Songs.⁵⁵ Many medieval Christians also came to associate the company of apocalyptic antagonists with contemporary religio-political enemies. And, in the northern European Middle Ages, the perceived enemies nearest to hand were Jews.⁵⁶ A few examples may suffice. Christian ecclesiastics commonly recognized the figure of Antichrist, or the False Prophet, in John's Apocalypse as a Jew descended from the tribe of Dan from the early Middle Ages on who cunningly tricked unlearned Christians into believing false doctrine and engaging in heretical practices. The two Beasts and the whore, Babylon the Great, served as symbols of capitalistic greed, insatiable lust, and general moral decline. These concepts were synonymous with "Jew" in medieval and early modern Europe, only to resurface most dangerously in Nazi ideology.⁵⁷

Such interpretations suggest the importance of archetypes symbolizing positive femininity—the chaste Mother and virginal Bride—as well as archetypes symbolizing negative femininity who threatened purity—the city and woman, the city as woman, both tempting the faithful to assimilate and fornicate, in body and spirit.⁵⁸ Yet, because that threat was further identified as “Jewish” to and by Christians, who lived in neighborhoods with Jews and regularly engaged in business, and sometimes exegetical activities and religious debates, a message of reform is hinted at which echoes the reproof John issued to the seven churches at the beginning of his Apocalypse—to refrain from the teaching of “false Jews,” or even interacting with them, lest they become polluted and punished along with those who had succumbed to the temptations of the Jezebels and Babylon the Great. Throughout the duration of the long twelfth century (c. 1050-1250 C.E.), Christian ecclesiastics increasingly came to recognize “false Jews” not as particularly wicked individuals who peddled heretical teachings, but all rabbinic Jews who had altered the traditions of the patriarchs and Scripture with Talmudic teachings and extra-biblical religious rites.⁵⁹ Thereafter, rhetoric and iconography promoted the idea that Jews at large posed a threat to the Christian polity.

The Sefer Zerubbabel may have worked in a similar manner for medieval Jews residing in northern Europe, who faced much pressure to assimilate and who, increasingly, began to demonize their Christian neighbors by categorizing the religio-political entity of Christendom as the current manifestation of the “evil empire” headed by none other than Satan; by employing the same biblical and post-biblical references of apocalyptic antagonists to Christian persecutors; and by flagrantly insulting the Mother Mary as both *niddah* and as a whore on par with Jezebel and Babylon the Great.⁶⁰ Thus, by examining the typological constructs of the Sefer Zerubbabel, what emerges is not only the anti-Christian polemic within a specific compositional context of seventh-century Palestine, which has been suggested at length by others, or, along these lines, as a subversive inversion of John’s Apocalypse,⁶¹ as it is increasingly understood, but as a reform

treatise, that likely remained as valuable for subsequent generations as it had for its original readers and hearers. In it, the author, and later redactors turned religious critique inwards, towards each Jewish community that received the text as a revelation of events transpiring in their own time.

Reforming rhetoric emerges in multiple scenarios of the Sefer Zerubbabel, three of which are especially significant. First, as noted above, the city that the Archangel Michael took Zerubbabel to on a mystical journey is identified both as Nineveh and Rome.⁶² If the author were in fact writing from within the Roman Empire, it would have been just as dangerous to name Rome as it was for John centuries earlier that had opted to identify the city and/or empire as Babylon. As such, it is unclear why the same logic of understanding city names in the Johannine Apocalypse as symbolic of archetypes is not generally practiced concerning the Sefer Zerubbabel. This is all the more perplexing as both Nineveh and Rome had long been included in Jewish reckonings of locales with eschatological significance and partnered with Babylon.⁶³ These sites figured in Jewish, and Jewish-Christian apocalyptic discourse precisely because they were the capitals of empires—Assyria, Babylonia, Rome—which had conquered Israel and dispersed the Jewish populace, and, in the case of the latter two, had toppled both incarnations of the Jerusalem Temple.

But these were not only sites of destruction; they were also sites of corruption, in which Israelites began to assimilate increasingly into the dominant culture. The biblical and apocryphal Jewish literature treating the Assyrian Diaspora, especially the Book of Tobit, suggests that the majority of the exiles had failed to adhere to dietary restrictions or to display apt devotion to God.⁶⁴ The biblical and apocryphal accounts of the Babylonian Diaspora do much the same. For instance, the fact that the editor(s) of the Book of Daniel presented the adherence to dietary restrictions by the title character as well as the other three Israelites who were taken as courtiers in Babylon—Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah—as exceptional suggests that others who had been

taken into captivity may have had less qualms about eating Gentile food.⁶⁵ Assimilative tendencies in the Babylonian Diaspora are further attested to when recognizing that a significant number of Jewish sojourners did not wish to return to Jerusalem when they were afforded the possibility. They led comfortable lives in Babylon and the pull of the Temple and its cult meant increasingly less as each generation became more integrated.⁶⁶ The same may be said for the Roman Diaspora, where numerous Jews began to dabble in Christianity as well as various other forms of sectarianism and idolatry, including demonology and magic.⁶⁷ The corrosive valence of each of the cities suggests a typological reading in addition to, if not in lieu of, the more common understanding of Rome as primarily symbolic of the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire—Heraclius’s Constantinople.

Second, a similar message of reform, and the typological use of multiple names to convey it, is also found in the persona of the messianic mother, Hephzibah. The name Hephzibah appears twice in the Hebrew Bible: once in II Kings 21, in relation to King Manasseh and King Hezekiah, Hephzibah’s son and husband, respectively; and once in Isaiah 62 as name for Israel redeemed.⁶⁸ In the first instance, Hephzibah serves as a neutral figure. While the queen is not implicated in evil herself, Hephzibah’s son, Manasseh,

did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, following the abominable practices of the nations . . . For he rebuilt the high places that his father Hezekiah had destroyed; he erected altars for Baal . . . [and] worshipped all the host of heaven and served them. (II Kings 21:2-4)

In talmudic lore, the rabbis of late antiquity would soften the blow and insist that this same Hephzibah had also given birth to a “good” son, a Messiah, who was in hiding but who would return at the appointed time of redemption.⁶⁹ Perhaps this formulation was based on the second biblical reference, in which the prophet Isaiah associated the name Hephzibah, meaning “My delight is in her,” with the religio-political reconstitution of Israel in the messianic era. For

the prophet, speaking as God, addressed an Israel who had sinned and had been duly punished before becoming penitent when declaring:

You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called Hephzibah, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you. (Isa. 62:4-5)

Within the longest version of the Sefer Zerubbabel, both of the above biblical associations with Hephzibah are alluded to. This is accomplished through the use of a web of familial relations. First, before being introduced to Hephzibah, the reader learns the identity of Menachem's father when the former declares, "I am the Lord's anointed, the son of Hezekiah."⁷⁰ When Hephzibah is introduced a short time later, a familial unit comprised of Hezekiah (father), Hephzibah (mother), and Menachem (son) is suggested which would coincide with the marriage of Hezekiah and Hephzibah noted in II Kings as well as with some rabbinic musings on the Messiah and a Jewish variant of the Christian Holy Family. Menachem in the Sefer Zerubbabel could have been meant to represent the "good" second son who, according to rabbinic legend, would be occluded until the Eschaton.⁷¹

This reading is problematized by mention of three other male personae related, potentially sexually, to Hephzibah. When the reader learns Menachem's full name, two other father figures are mentioned: "This is the Lord's Messiah . . . the Messiah ben David, and his name is Menahem ben 'Amiel."⁷² The concept of a Messiah ben David is commonly understood as a reference to a Messiah of the lineage of King David and does not necessarily imply sexualized association, yet the given name "Menachem," followed by "ben 'Amiel," suggests that a certain 'Amiel had sired the Messiah in much the same way that Menachem's earlier declaration had indicated Hezekiah's parentage. Based on rabbinic understandings of Hezekiah's messianic role and the eight names attributed to him according to the Babylonian Talmud, Lévi

as well as Martha Himmelfarb have suggested that the patronymic “ben ‘Amiel” may have merely been another way of stating “Menachem ben Hezekiah.”⁷³

This explanation, though useful, does not sufficiently address the final male the Sefer Zerubbabel names in connection to Hephzibah: Michael/Metatron declared that Hephzibah’s husband was the prophet Nathan.⁷⁴ There is no immediate connection to be drawn between the prophet Nathan and King Hezekiah. Based on biblical chronology, these two personae would have lived approximately three hundred years apart. Yet, there are some typological similarities. Nathan, like Hezekiah, is presented as exceedingly pious in the biblical narrative and, in further connection with the reforming trope noted above, is best known for chastising King David for illicit sexual relations. Thus, it is possible that one explanation for the different husband personae associated with Hephzibah has to do with their similar religious identities. In both cases the piety of Hezekiah/‘Amiel and Nathan, wed to Hephzibah—the concept of delighting God—was followed by a period of moral and national decline ushered in by wayward sons who erected altars to foreign deities, ate prohibited foods, and copulated with foreign women.

Third, it appears that redactors of the Sefer Zerubbabel capitalized on the tension between these references to Hephzibah to an even greater degree by representing the Messiah as imprisoned in the same type of locale as Satan’s paramour, the stone statue, occupied. Once again utilizing creative wordplay to urge reform, both were revealed to reside in a *bet ha-toref*. The multivalent connotation about Menachem’s imprisonment echoes the by now familiar trope of the vagina that inspired idolatry and befouled Israel. It is not for nothing that only after Hephzibah, symbolic of Israel reformed—a feminine personification whose penitence in the prophecy of Isaiah gave way to valor and might—had guarded the eastern gate to protect against enemy penetration that the Messiah was freed from the corruption of the *bet ha-toref*. Once shaking the lure of idolatry that had imprisoned the Menachem for so long, the Messiah was able

to defeat the powers of evil. The message: the messianic era would only come when Israel reformed by disentangling itself from the allure of foreigners and their religion.

The connotation of this term regarding the stone statue is more complex. It served as the only example in the Sefer Zerubbabel of embodied corrosive femininity, however in/animate. It both bore and resided within a *bet ha-toref*, and it, like Hephzibah, was associated with more than one sexual partner. In the same way that Hephzibah's marriage to Nathan and relationship with Hezekiah symbolized the positive relationship between God and Israel, the relationships of the stone statue symbolized Israel failing the test of religious fidelity. In the Sefer Zerubbabel, Michael/Metatron introduced the statue as "the wife of Belial," and when foretelling the conception of Armilos, said: "Satan will come and lie with her."⁷⁵ The name "Belial" or a variant of it is mentioned twenty-seven times within the Hebrew Bible, including in the book of the prophet Nachum, who famously chastised Nineveh as a den of idolatry and exhorted Judah to practice the religion of the patriarchs, promising that if the faithful saw that this was accomplished, "never again shall the wicked one (Belial) invade you." (Nah. 1:15)⁷⁶ "Satan," or a variant of it, is also mentioned twenty-seven times within the Hebrew Bible but is, perhaps, best known as the adversary who encouraged God to test Job to apostatize.⁷⁷ Thus, if the author of the Sefer Zerubbabel had in fact intended the stone statue to symbolize Mother Mary, the metaphor served as more than a polemical attack on Christian doctrine. The statue's sexual encounters with Belial and Satan, as well as its residence in a sexualized *bet ha-toref*, are elements in a cautionary tale. They function to warn readers and hearers of the Sefer Zerubbabel to resist the temptation of idolatry and, if having faltered, against fully converting and perpetuating imprisonment in the filth of the house of idolatry, as well as being used to corrupt other Jews by persuading them to apostatize.

The textual messages of the need for reform are subtly reinforced by anomalies in different versions of the Sefer Zerubbabel, as well as in manuscript composition dating to

medieval Ashkenaz. For instance, in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Opp 603, ff. 32b-34b the Sefer Zerubbabel, figures as one text in a collection containing reform doctrines, such as the Sefer Hasidim, or Book of the Pious. In this same manuscript, a scribe went to the trouble to replace the common descriptor of the stone statue as a “virgin” to that of “woman.”⁷⁸ In so doing, the sexual status of the statue was perceptually altered—as was Mother Mary’s, by extension—in a manner commiserate with popular anti-Christian polemic at the time which challenged the doctrine of the virginal Incarnation of Jesus. The scribe also over-lined Hephzibah’s name in a manner similar to the way the Name of God (*HaShem*), Michael, and Metatron are adorned.⁷⁹ This feature not only aligns Hephzibah with the heavenly court, it also serves to emphasize the role of the Mother of the Messiah to a greater degree than the other human messianic figures in the text—Menachem and Nehemiah—whose names are in no way adorned. Combined, these textual variances convey that the statue/Mary’s impregnation by Belial/Satan was base and accomplished through unnatural and compulsory sex; Hephzibah, by contrast, was the true Mother of the Messiah and wed to all who would willingly perform the *mitzvot*. Along similar lines, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Heb. d. 11, contains further apocryphal legends of Zerubbabel, in which the exilarch is praised above all other sages for declaring that women prove the most powerful entities on the earth for their ability as seductresses to so fully defile humanity and turn men from true religion, but also for their role as mothers to birth, teach, and chastise, whose lessons the wayward child would always return to. The Hephzibah of this manuscript functions as such a mother, to correct the children of Israel, including the Messiah, who fell prey to the seductive lure of sex, idolatry, or sexualized idolatry and wallowed in the *bet ha-toref*.

The Apocalypse of St. John and the Sefer Zerubbabel show sex to be anything but casual in the apocalypse. Combined, these texts indicate that sex functioned as a means of distinguishing between sinner and saint. The authors of both employed symbols of unseemly

sexual relations to convey the shortcomings of their communities and to call for reform and resistance to assimilative pressures. John did so by highlighting the terror of personified and feminized evil whose power of seduction was so strong it needed to be either suppressed or overcome—indeed, utterly annihilated—after male lust had been sated. The author of the Sefer Zerubbabel echoed this stance, to a degree, though far less passionately (and violently) than John, yet room was also made for positive sexual metaphors. The author acknowledged the temptation of foreign culture that Jews—even the Messiah—had succumbed to repeatedly. As in John’s Apocalypse, this was conveyed symbolically through the personification of *niddah* femininity (or, at least female anatomy) and foreign religion in one fell swoop, through the catchall term *bet ha-toref*. Even so, the Sefer Zerubbabel suggested that those who had trifled with foreign women and tarried in a church might find their way out and, by resisting making the same mistake twice, aid in the redemption of all of Israel.

Notes

¹ Many thanks to the American Academy for Jewish Research, the University of New Mexico Regents, the Feminist Research Institute of the University of New Mexico, and the History Graduate Student Association for funding 2015 summer research at the libraries of Oxford and Cambridge. Thanks also to the Russell J. and Dorothy S. Bilinski Foundation and the Dudley Phillips Foundation for their generous fellowships that have facilitated the drafting of this essay in its present form. An earlier version of this essay was presented at a colloquium of the Feminist Research Institute of the University of New Mexico, April 2016, and thanks are also owed to Devorah Schoenfeld, Timothy C. Graham, Noel H. Pugach, and Liz Ebel, who provided valuable comments on that earlier version, and to David Stern, who was encouraging and helpful at numerous phases of this essay's development.

² Examples of this motif may be found in the copious Daniel and Enoch literature, the *Apocalypse of Adam*, the *Apocalypse of Noah*, the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, the *Apocalypse of Moses*, the *Sefer Zerubbabel*, and the *Apocalypse of St. John*, among others. For a detailed discussion of the contents of Jewish apocalyptic literature, see John C. Reeves, *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic: A Postbiblical Jewish Apocalypse Reader* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005); and Martha Himmelfarb, *The Apocalypse: A Brief History* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

³ For a discussion of "internal" and "external" enemies—co-religionists and practitioners of different religions—in apocalyptic literature, see James T. Palmer, "Apocalyptic Outsiders and Their Uses in the Early Medieval West," in *Peoples of the Apocalypse: Eschatological Beliefs and Political Scenarios*, ed. Wolfram Brandes et al. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2016), 307-320.

⁴ See Natalie E. Latteri, "Jewish Apocalypticism: An Historiography," in *A Companion to the Premodern Apocalypse*, ed. Michael A. Ryan (Leiden: Brill, 2016), especially 78-80.

⁵ See, for example, Paul Hanson, *The Dawn of the Apocalyptic: The Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 6-27, for a cogent discussion apocalypses as depictions of an ethos of delayed gratification; Adela Yarbro Collins, "The Revelation of John: An Apocalyptic Response to a Social Crisis," *Currents in Theology and Mission* (1981): 12, for a description of John's Apocalypse as a "vehicle for the expression and outlet of feelings of envy, resentment and desire for revenge"; John E. Stanley, "The Apocalypse and Contemporary Sect Analysis," *SBL Seminar Papers* (1986): 416, for a characterization of John's Apocalypse as a wish for economic revenge; Marla J. Selvidge, "Powerful and Powerless Women in the Apocalypse," *Neotestamentica* 26, no. 1 (1992): 157, too casts John's Apocalypse as "the hope of exacting revenge"; and Elaine Pagels, *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, and Politics in the Book of Revelations* (New York: Viking, 2012), 8, also presents John's Apocalypse as motivated by vengeance against Rome: "Horried by the slaughter of so many of his people by Rome, John put his own cry of anguish into the mouths of the souls he says he saw in heaven, pleading for God's justice."

⁶ David Biale, "Counter-History and Jewish Polemics against Christianity: The *Sefer Toldot Yeshu* and the *Sefer Zerubavel*," *Jewish Social Studies* 6, no. 1 (1999): 137; and Anthea Portier-Young, "Jewish Apocalyptic Literature as Resistance Literature," in *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*, ed. John J. Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 145-162.

⁷ For a brief discussion of Jewish apocalypses in the Enochic corpus utilizing a sexualized critique of defilement by impure women, see Edmondo F. Lupieri, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse of John*, trans. Maria Poggi Johnson and

Adam Kamesar (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 15-17. For a discussion of the Jewish-Christian Sibyllina and Pseudo-Methodius's critique against sexual impropriety and its contribution to communal devastation, see Johannes Fried, "Awaiting the End of Time around the Turn of the Year 1000," in *The Apocalyptic Year 1000: Religious Expectation and Social Change, 950-1050*, ed. Richard Landes, et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 24-26; and Palmer, "Apocalyptic Outsiders," 316-318.

⁸ Pagels, *Revelations*, 2-3. For a contrarian position, See Thomas B. Slater, "Dating the Apocalypse to John," *Biblica* 84, no. 2 (2003): 252-258, who argues that John wrote before the destruction of the Temple, around 68-70 C.E.

⁹ For extended discussions of the ethos of reform in John's Apocalypse and how it continues the Jewish prophetic tradition, see Robert M. Royalty Jr., *The Origin of Heresy: A History of Discourse in Second Temple Judaism and Early Christianity* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 147-171; and Lupieri, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 27-46.

¹⁰ Michael D. Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 427n3:15-16,18.

¹¹ This metaphor is prolific throughout the prophetic texts. A few examples include: Isaiah 1; Jeremiah 1, 3; Ezekiel 23; and the book of Hosea in its entirety.

¹² Again, this metaphor is ubiquitous. A few examples include: Amos 17:7; Ezekiel 16:37, 23:10; Genesis 9:23; Isaiah 47:3; Lamentations 1:3.

¹³ Cf. Selvidge, "Powerful and Powerless," 159-160.

¹⁴ Balaam's role in sexual transgression is relished in the Babylonian Talmud, in which rabbis fantasized about his punishment in a boiling vat of semen. See Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 86-87.

¹⁵ Taboos against miscegenation are rampant throughout the biblical text as well as the Jewish apocrypha. Important examples include the narrative of King Solomon's demise due to his relationships with foreign women who led him to commit idolatry and aid in the idolatry of other by erecting altars to foreign deities (I Kings 11); and the downfall of the sons of God who were aroused by the daughters of man, abandoning appropriate worship and ushering in disaster (*I Enoch* 6-11).

¹⁶ See, for example, Numbers, chaps. 22-31; I Kings, chaps. 16-19.

¹⁷ Both Queen Jezebel in the Hebrew Bible and Jezebel of Thyatira in John's Apocalypse are described as being thrown down by men who finally conquered them. See II Kings 9:33 and Apocalypse 2:22, respectively.

¹⁸ See 'Avodah Zara 36b: "With all the things against which they decreed, the purpose was to safeguard against idolatry. For when R. Aha b. Adda came [from Palestine] he declared in the name of R. Isaac: They decreed against [heathens'] bread on account of their oil. But how is oil stricter than bread!—Rather [should the statement read that they made a decree] against their bread and oil on account of their wine; against their wine on account of their daughters; against their daughters on account of another matter, and against this other matter on account of still another matter. [But the prohibition against marrying] their daughters is a Biblical ordinance, for it is written, 'Neither shall though make marriages with them!'"

¹⁹ There are many examples of food taboos throughout Jewish literature. For examples of those joined to eschatological thought, see Daniel 1:5-15; *Tobit* 1:10-11.

²⁰ See note 18 above.

²¹ Galatians 5:1-10.

²² I Corinthians 8:8.

²³ Numerous scholars have noted the common tendency to demonize those holding differing religious views in the Jewish, Christian, and Jewish-Christian communities engaged in the process of self-definition. Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, 52-62, and Gideon Bohak, "Magical Means for Handling *Minim* in Rabbinic Literature," in *The Image of the Judaeo-Christians in Ancient Jewish and Christian Literature*, ed. Peter J. Tomson and Doris Lambers-Petry (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 267-279, among others, have related claims of demonization to the perception that followers of Jesus were practitioners of magic.

²⁴ Selvidge, "Powerful and Powerless," 159-161, 164; and Jennifer A. Glancy and Stephen D. Moore, "How Typical a Roman Prostitute Is Revelation's 'Great Whore'?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 30, no. 3 (2011): 568, who conclude that sexual violence is envisioned for Babylon the Great, though they do not mention the similar treatment of Jezebel.

²⁵ See Apocalypse, chps. 17-18.

²⁶ The iconographic program of illuminated apocalypses in medieval Europe was fairly standardized. Most include Babylon mounted on the Seven-headed Beast, yet those of her on waters is somewhat less so. An example of the latter is found in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Tanner 184, p. 46 (this particular manuscript is paginated rather than foliated).

²⁷ James A. Brundage, "Sex and Canon Law," in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York: Routledge, 1996), 40.

²⁸ Apocalypse 17:16.

²⁹ Apocalypse 18:7.

³⁰ Glancy and Moore, "How Typical a Roman Prostitute," 551-569, are the first known scholars to depict Babylon as the Beast's whore, and he as her pimp.

³¹ For a comparative discussion of the passivity of the "woman clothed with the son," see Selvidge, "Powerful and Powerless," 161-163. Positive perceptions of feminine passivity and taboos against women as active conquerors may be derived from Hellenistic attitudes about women, and especially the influence of the Roman Mother Goddess on the early Church. For a fuller discussion of this influence, see Clarissa W. Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 101-143, especially. This differs somewhat from representations of women in the Hebrew Bible and Jewish tradition, as discussed in note 53 below.

³² Cf. Selvidge, "Powerful and Powerless," 163. John's stance on sex, in this regard, appears similar to Hellenistic depictions of the Qumran/Essenes community found in the writings of Pliny the Elder, Philo, and Josephus. Whether or not the apocalyptic sect was in fact either celibate or unusually misogynistic for the period, though, has recently come into question. See David W. Kim, "Hearing the Unsung Voice: Women in the Qumran Community," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 2, no. 19 (2012): 275-282; and Paul Heger, "Celibacy in Qumran: Hellenistic Fiction or Reality? Qumran's Attitude Toward Sex," *Revue de Qumrân* 26, no. 1 (2013): 53-90.

³³ See, for example, the title in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Opp. 603, f. 32b: ל"מאילו ז' וחדושים זה הספר זרובבל contra Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Opp. 236a, f. 13a: האל אתחיל ספר זרובבל בן שאלחאל בעזרת. Many thanks to Judah Bob Rosenwald for his help transcribing and translating difficult passages in MS Opp. 603.

³⁴ Many thanks to César Merchan-Hamann, Director of the Leopold Muller Memorial Library and Curator of Hebraica and Judaica at the Bodleian, for granting access to this manuscript and for taking time out of an incredibly busy schedule to patiently supervise the photography of it. For an introduction and the best translation of this version in English, see Martha Himmelfarb, *Sefer Zerubbabel*, in *Rabbinic Fantasies: Imaginative Narratives from Classical Hebrew Literature*, ed. David Stern and Mark Jay Mirsky (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 67-90.

³⁵ Haggai 1:1, 2; Zechariah 4:6-14; Ezra 2:2, 3, 5:2.

³⁶ See Reeves, *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic*, 43-47.

³⁷ "Then a spirit lifted me between heaven and earth and led me about Nineveh" Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Heb. d. 11, f. 248a, line 14: "I asked, 'What is the name of this place?' 'This is Rome the Great,' ibid., lines 25-26; ibid., f. 249a, line 21: "Nineveh, the city of blood, which is Rome the Great." Cf. Himmelfarb, *Sefer Zerubbabel*, 72-73.

³⁸ Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Heb. d. 11, f. 248a, line 21; Isa. 53: 3-5; b. *Sanh.* 98a; Cf. Himmelfarb, *Sefer Zerubbabel*, 72n29. For an extended discussion of the messianic motif of the suffering servant in rabbinic literature, see Abraham Berger, "Captive at the Gate of Rome: The Story of a Messianic Motif," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 44 (1977): 1-17.

³⁹ David Biale was the first, to my knowledge, to call attention to the multiplicity of meanings of *bet ha-toref* within the context of the *Sefer Zerubbabel*: "Counter-History and Jewish Polemics against Christianity," 139-140.

[Editor's note: "...the vulva everywhere in the Talmud is called *bet ha-toref*, *bet ha-setarim*, *bet ha-ḥizon* (exterior chamber; hidden chamber; outer chamber), which also includes the labia." See *Encyclopedia Judaica*:

Anatomy, Source: *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. © 2008 The Gale Group. Available at <http://tinyurl.com/j92v6jh>]

⁴⁰ Michael and Metatron seem to be used interchangeably in the extant versions without any specific, or consistent, ideological program. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Heb. d. 11, f. 248b, lines 11-12 read: "Then Michael, who is Metatron, answered 'I am the angel who led Abraham through all the land of Canaan.'" Cf. Himmelfarb, *Sefer Zerubbabel*, 73. Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Opp. 603, by contrast, is not as clear in its identification of Metatron and Michael as the same entity. Rather, f. 33a, line 13 explicitly acknowledges Metatron as the angel "who led Abraham," etc., and only later mentions Michael as a name, used interchangeably with Metatron, of the entity responding to Zerubbabel's questions regarding the eschatological sequence: see, f. 33b, lines 1 and 14. While there is much scholarly literature devoted to Metatron and his varied levels of identity, it is unknown if there has been an explanation of the potential motivation for scribal usage.

⁴¹ For a discussion of the significance of the rod of the patriarchs in Jewish eschatology, see Christine Meilicke, "Moses's Staff and the Return of the Dead," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 6 (1999): 345-372; and Reeves, *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic*, 187-199. Incidentally, the same rod makes several appearances in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Heb. d. 11.

⁴² Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Heb. d. 11, f. 251a, lines 3-7; Cf. Himmelfarb, *Sefer Zerubbabel*, 80.

⁴³ Himmelfarb, *Sefer Zerubbabel*, in *Rabbinic Fantasies*, 69. For an extended discussion of the significance of Hephzibah as messianic Mother, see eadem, "The Mother of the Messiah in the Talmud Yerushalmi and *Sefer Zerubbabel*," in *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture*, ed. Peter Schäfer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck,

2002), 369-389, where Himmelfarb shows that the messianic Mother was present in rabbinic literature other than the apocalyptic genre.

⁴⁴ Himmelfarb, "The Mother of the Messiah," 384-385, emphasizes, by contrast, Hephzibah's masculine qualities and the ambiguous nature of her marriage, which will be discussed further below.

⁴⁵ Selvidge, "Powerful and Powerless," 161-163.

⁴⁶ In 'Avodah Zara, 36b, Nahman b. Isaac, considered all Gentile women to be *niddah* from the time of their birth on; and the Hasmonean court went even further, declaring every Gentile woman to be "*niddah*, a slave, a non-Jewess, and a harlot."

⁴⁷ For claims that John's symbolism may have been tempered by fears of repercussions by the Roman ruling class, see Leonard Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 191-197; and Pagels, *Revelations*, 34.

⁴⁸ Heinrich Graetz, "Das Buch Zerubabel," in *Geschichte der Juden: von den ältesten Zeiten bis auf die Gegenwart. Aus den Quellen neu bearbeitet*, Vol. 6, 2nd ed. (Leipzig: O. Leiner, 1900), 59. Many thanks to Matthew Carver for providing a translation of the above text.

⁴⁹ Israel Lévi, "L'apocalypse de Zorobabel et le roi de Perse Siroès," *Revue des études juives* 68 (1914): 151n3.

⁵⁰ See Reeves, intro. to *Sefer Zerubbabel*, in *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic*, 47-48. For a contrarian position, see Joseph Dan, "Armilus: The Jewish Antichrist and the Origins and Dating of the *Sefer Zerubbabel*," in *Toward the Millennium: Messianic Expectations from the Bible to Waco*, ed. Peter Schäfer and Mark Cohen (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 73-104, who argues for the validity of a fifth-century date of composition.

⁵¹ Israel Lévi, "L'apocalypse de Zorobabel et le roi de Perse Siroès," *Revue des études juives* 71 (1920): 57-65; Ernst Kitzinger, "The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 8 (1954): 111; Himmelfarb, *Sefer Zerubbabel*, 69; and eadem., "Mother of the Messiah," 384.

⁵² Arthur S. Peake, *The Revelation of John* (London: Holborn Publishing, 1919), 305-307; R. H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1920), 315; Atkinson, *Oldest Vocation*, 106-108; Selvidge, "Powerful and Powerless," 161-163; Louis A. Brighton, *Revelation*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Pub., 1999), 318-319, 326-328; and Pagels, *Revelations*, 29-30.

⁵³ Himmelfarb, "Mother of the Messiah," 379-380, notes how the appeal of a messianic mother was strong among early Palestinian Jews in response to the prominent position of the Virgin Mary within Christianity, as evidenced in the rabbinic critique of this fascination found in the Talmud Yerushalmi. Yet, as noted above, Himmelfarb does not recognize Hephzibah's role as particularly maternal or even feminine in the *Sefer Zerubbabel*. This observation is valid based on modern, western notions of maternal standards of the quality of relationship between mother and child during pregnancy and, even more so, after birth, as well as trenchant patriarchal constructs of femininity which oppose the notion of a feminine or female warrior. Himmelfarb's reasoning is less understandable in light of representations of femininity and womanhood in biblical and post-biblical Jewish literature. The only "maternal quality" of the messianic mother of John's Apocalypse is the delivery of her child and not in regard to any nurturing capacity. And a tradition of female Jewish warriors in the vein of Judith, Deborah, and Jael, calls into question her assertion that women warriors were something of an oddity, or unfeminine.

⁵⁴ Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 30.

⁵⁵ See Pagels, *Revelations*, 30, 181.

⁵⁶ For a discussion of medieval interpretations of the positive symbols of Mother and Bride in John's Apocalypse as Mary and/or Ecclesia, see E. Ann Matter, "The Apocalypse in Early Medieval Exegesis," in *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, ed. Richard K. Emmerson and Bernard McGinn (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 44, 46; and Rebecca S. Beal, "Bonaventure, Dante and the Apocalyptic Woman clothed with the Sun," *Dante Studies* 144 (1996): 209-228. For a discussion of medieval associations between each of the apocalyptic antagonists and Jews, see Sara Lipton, *Images of Intolerance: The Representation of Jews and Judaism in the Bible Moralisée* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); and Debra Higgs Strickland, "Antichrist and the Jews in Medieval Art and Protestant Propaganda," *Studies in Iconography* 32 (2011): 1-50.

⁵⁷ For an excellent discussion of a Jewish Antichrist, see C. E. Hill, "Antichrist from the Tribe of Dan," *Journal of Theological Studies* 46, no. 1 (1995): 99-117. For Jews as symbols of capitalism and medieval unease about a new monetary economy within the city, see Lipton, *Images of Intolerance*, 24, 27-29, 31-39, 45-52.

⁵⁸ The city of Jerusalem is not typically included in the apocalyptic trope of city as a corrupting entity for obvious reasons—namely, in apocalyptic literature, it is imagined as a purified Jewish theocracy and outside of the realm of earthly cities which had contributed to Israel's demise. As in early Christian conceptions, evident in Augustine's *City of God*, the Jerusalem of the *Sefer Zeubbabel*, or at least the Temple complex, is celestial.

⁵⁹ David Timmer, "Biblical Exegesis and the Jewish Christian Controversy in the Early Twelfth Century," *Church History* 58, no. 3 (1989): 313-320. See also Jeremy Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews: The Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982); and idem, "Jews as the Killers of Christ in the Latin Tradition, from Augustine to the Friars," *Traditio* 39 (1983): 1-27.

⁶⁰ See, for instance, the mid-twelfth-century *Chronicle of Solomon bar Samson*, in which there are numerous references to Christians as descendants of Edom and Seir, and Pope Urban II as "Satan . . . the pope of evil Rome"; crusaders are cast as עו פנים, a descriptor found in Deuteronomy 28:50 and Daniel 8:23 in reference to peoples acting as God's scourge, as well as in the *Sefer Zerubbabel* to describe the apocalyptic antagonist Siroy (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Opp. 603, f. 33a, line 11; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Heb. d. 11, f. 248b, line 9; Himmelfarb, *Sefer Zerubbabel*, 73); and Mary is repeatedly referred to as a menstruant and whore in the vein of *Toledot Yeshu* literature which became more prolific during the High Middle Ages: *The Chronicle of Solomon bar Samson*, in Eva Haverkamp, ed., *Hebraische Berichte über die Judenverfolgungen während des ersten Kreuzzugs* (Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 2005), 299, 249, 371.

⁶¹ Biale, "Counter-History and Jewish Polemics against Christianity," 137-142.

⁶² See note 37 above.

⁶³ The eschatological significance of Nineveh emerges in the biblical books of Nahum and Jonah, as well as in the apocryphal *Tobit*. The significance of Babylon is even more pronounced within the biblical text, apocrypha, and rabbinic literature. After the first century destruction of the Temple, Rome also figured prominently in rabbinic and popular writings. See N. R. M. de Lange, "Jewish Attitudes to the Roman Empire," in *Imperialism in the Ancient World*, ed. P. D. A. Grannny and C. R. Whittaker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 255-281; and David Flusser, *Judaism of the Second Temple: Qumran and Apocalypticism*, trans. Azzan Yadin (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 236.

⁶⁴ *Tobit* is explicit regarding the sins of those captured and taken to Nineveh: "All my kindred and our ancestral house of Naphtali sacrificed to the calf that King Jeroboam of Israel had erected in Dan and on all the mountains of

Galilee" (*Tob.* 1:5); and in regard to the assimilation of exiles while there: "After I was carried away captive to Assyria and came as a captive to Nineveh, everyone of my kindred and my people ate the food of the Gentiles, but I kept myself from eating the food of the Gentiles. Because I was mindful of God." (*Tob.* 1: 10-12)

⁶⁵ See Daniel 1:8-16.

⁶⁶ Pamela Barmash, "At the Nexus of History and Memory: The Ten Lost Tribes," *AJS Review* 29, no. 2 (2005): 207-235.

⁶⁷ See Shaye Cohen, "The Significance of Yavneh: Pharisees, Rabbis, and the End of Jewish Sectarianism," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 55 (1984): 27-53; idem, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999); Rosemary Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1997), 53-54; Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford University Press, 1999); idem, "A Tale of Two Synods: Nicaea, Yavneh, and Rabbinic Ecclesiology," *Exemplaria* 12, no. 1 (2000): 21-62; idem, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*; idem., *The Jewish Jesus: How Judaism and Christianity Shaped Each Other* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); and Eric M. Meyers, "Jewish Culture in Greco-Roman Palestine," in *Cultures of the Jews*, ed. David Biale (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 162-168.

⁶⁸ Himmelfarb, "Mother of the Messiah," 385.

⁶⁹ See *Sanhedrin* 94a; *Berakhot* 28b.

⁷⁰ Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Heb. d. 11, f. 248a, line 28; Himmelfarb, *Sefer Zerubbabel*, 72. This is the only extant recension that includes Hezekiah: Himmelfarb, "Mother of the Messiah," 387.

⁷¹ See note 69 above.

⁷² Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Heb. d. 11, f. 248b, line 20; Himmelfarb, *Sefer Zerubbabel*, 73.

⁷³ Lévi, "L'apocalypse," 146n4; Himmelfarb, "Mother of the Messiah," 386-387.

⁷⁴ Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Heb. d. 11, f. 249a, lines 16-17; Himmelfarb, *Sefer Zerubbabel*, 80. The first printed edition of the *Sefer Zerubbabel* is anomalous in its declaration that Nathan was husband of Hephzibah and the son of David: Himmelfarb, "Mother of the Messiah," 388-389.

⁷⁵ Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Heb. d. 11, f. 249a, lines 24-25; Himmelfarb, *Sefer Zerubbabel*, 75.

⁷⁶ Nahum 2:1 according to the Masoretic text.

⁷⁷ Job 1:6-12, 2:1-8.

⁷⁸ See Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Opp. 603, f. 34a, line 2 contra Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Heb. d. 11, f. 249a, line 23. Many thanks to Martha Himmelfarb for pointing out the anomalous use of "woman" in MS Opp. 603.

⁷⁹ See Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Opp. 603, f. 33a, line 2; f. 33b, line 12; f. 34a, lines 1, 2, 11, 14, 16, 19, and 20; f. 34b, lines 13 and 24.

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